



Interview On ABC News With Jonathan Karl

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Cairo, Egypt
June 20, 2005

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, you said today it is essential that Egypt hold free and fair elections this year. So what if they don't?

SECRETARY RICE: We are here -- I am here -- to encourage a process that begun here in Egypt. And President Mubarak has opened the door. I think this reform process is going to go in directions that may be quite interesting and important for this region. I had a chance to meet while I was here with some members of civil society, some of the political opposition. People are planning and discussing and putting together their campaigns and their work.

And so we're going to continue to encourage this process and that's the important thing -- we have a good relationship with Egypt. I have a good personal relationship with President Mubarak. I don't think we need to do anything at this point but recognize that there is a dramatic change potentially underway here in Egypt and try to encourage that.

QUESTION: So there's nothing that Egypt has to fear by holding what many people fear will be a sham election?

SECRETARY RICE: Jon, I have no desire and I'm not going to get into hypotheticals about what might happen in the future. We know that a lot has happened in this country just over the last six months. We know that a lot has happened in this region over the last six months. And Egypt is now clearly in the spotlight in terms of how these elections take place. I've had discussions with the Egyptians privately and publicly about the importance of their carrying out free and fair elections. This is a great culture and a great country that has led this region at very important times in its history. And I'm quite certain that the Egyptians understand how strongly the United States feels and how strongly really the world feels about the desire that these be real elections.

QUESTION: You mentioned you met with opposition leaders. The two largest and most important opposition groups in this country are Kefaya, those are the ones that are holding all those demonstrations across the country for democracy; and the Muslim Brotherhood. And yet you didn't invite either one. Why did you not invite the two largest opposition groups to meet you?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, in fact, in one case, we do respect the laws of Egypt. But I had very good discussions with Egyptian opposition here, including with Ayman Nour, who just recently was, of course, in jail and is still facing a trial in this country.

I think the Egyptians understand how strong America's commitment is to democracy here in Egypt, how strong America's commitment is to reform here in Egypt. And that was a terrific meeting with members of the opposition and we are open at our Embassy to talk to a variety of people from a variety of backgrounds. But we're going to respect Egyptian laws. We're going to continue to talk about the importance of democracy and reform here. And I think it's making a difference.

QUESTION: So you're going to respect Egyptian law? So the fact that Muslim Brotherhood is banned by the government is the reason why you won't meet with them?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I --

QUESTION: You won't meet with a group that's banned by the government?

SECRETARY RICE: Jonathan, the opportunity here to meet with opposition from a wide variety who, by the way, argued among themselves about how fundamental these reforms are, shows to me that the people that we're meeting here with and the message that we're carrying and the message that we're delivering is getting through in Egypt, is getting through to the opposition and it's getting through to the government.

And again, when it was an issue of Ayman Nour, not only did we speak out, but we spoke out in a way with the Egyptian Government that I think got something done.

So I'm going to continue to work at this in a way that I think is going to get something done with the Egyptian Government and with these reformers.

QUESTION: Okay, but coming back to the Muslim Brotherhood because they are considered the largest opposition group in this country. Why won't you meet with them?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let's see who the largest opposition groups in this country will be when they have a free and fair process, which is what we're concentrating on at this point. We're concentrating on trying to keep open and, in fact, press open further the door that President Mubarak has opened ajar. One of the people in the groups said, "no, the door is not really open, it's ajar." And I said to them, "well, you have an opportunity then to push it further open." And we're determined to show the people of Egypt that the United States is on the side of reform, the United States is on the side of an open process.

In my speech here I outlined the conditions that lead to free and fair elections. I stood next to the Foreign Minister of Egypt, who said that there are going to be free and fair and transparent elections. Egypt knows now that the world is watching these elections and that the world expects them to be free and fair.

QUESTION: But you still haven't answered the question about the Muslim Brotherhood. I mean, what is it about --

SECRETARY RICE: Jonathan, I've answered your question several times. We are going to respect Egyptian laws here, but we are also going to make certain that we are delivering a message about the importance here of reform, about the importance of people being able to express their views, about the importance of elections that are free and fair. And indeed, we expect the Egyptian Government to fulfill conditions that everybody internationally knows lead to free and fair -- a free and fair election.

QUESTION: Are you concerned -- (audio blip) -- members of the Muslim Brotherhood in jail the last several months? I mean, is this something that concerns you?

SECRETARY RICE: I spoke out today about the importance of getting rid of the emergency decrees. I also spoke out today about the importance of an independent judiciary and the importance of stopping what seemed to be practices of arbitrary justice.

I'm going to continue to speak out about the structural reforms that are needed not just here in Egypt but around the world. But we also need to recognize that there is a change that is starting here in Egypt that is being picked up by Egyptians themselves. We are here -- America is here -- to encourage these people to pick up these changes and to push forward.

When there are incidents like the one that took place in which men and women, in particular women, were brutalized during a protest, we speak out about it. When Ayman Nour was jailed, we speak out about it. I think we're doing more than our part here in Egypt to make very clear that the United States cares about the treatment of people, about the rule of law and about the ability of people to openly engage in political activity.

QUESTION: Has anybody been held responsible for what happened in terms of the women who were protesting getting abused, getting sexually harassed, getting beaten? Has anybody been held accountable with (inaudible)?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the Egyptian Government knows well our concerns about this and we expect that there is going to be a thorough investigation and understanding of what happened there.

QUESTION: Would you acknowledge that the United States, even with this new talk of human rights and democracy in the Middle East, still does have double standards in this region: one standard for our allies and one standard for countries like Iran and Syria?

SECRETARY RICE: Jonathan, I'm here in Egypt talking openly about the problems of reform and democracy, challenging the Egyptian Government to live up to the promise that it's just made to hold free and fair elections. Egypt is one of our strongest strategic partners. And here I sit in Egypt -- and by the way, at the American University in Cairo, on Egyptian television this morning.

Yes, Egypt actually is taking some steps forward and that needs to be encouraged and applauded and we need to work with that.

I have to say that the Iranians are taking steps backwards and we're going to say that when it happens as well. The Iranians held an election in which thousands of people were disqualified by an unelected few mullahs and women were disqualified altogether. Why wouldn't we speak out about that, whatever our state of relations with Iran?

QUESTION: Your next stop in Saudi Arabia, and if I'm reading, as I have, the State Department Human Rights Report, State Department Religious Freedom Report, the State Department Report on Human Trafficking, Saudi Arabia sounds like one of the most repressive countries on the face of the earth.

SECRETARY RICE: Clearly --

QUESTION: From the State Department --

SECRETARY RICE: Clearly, from our point of view, there is much work to be done in Saudi Arabia from the point of view of human rights and democracy. And we've made that clear. That's why we issue those reports. That's why we are very transparent about the state of affairs in Saudi Arabia. We don't try to hide those facts.

And despite the fact, by the way, that we have a very good strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia, those facts are printed for everyone to see in these reports. And again, today in my speech I talked about the imprisoned of people in Saudi Arabia who shouldn't have been imprisoned for petitioning their government. I'll continue to raise these issues with the Saudis.

Again, we have some small but nevertheless good steps in Saudi Arabia toward municipal elections. We hope that next time women will be able to vote.

But we have to recognize that countries are going to move at different speeds. Our responsibility is to continue to speak out for these values, to encourage steps when they are taken, and to speak clearly and truthfully about what more has to be done.

QUESTION: But women, as you mentioned, aren't even allowed to vote in Saudi Arabia in those limited elections they have, and they're very limited. Women aren't even allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm going to worry about women voting. I don't know about women driving. I think that when women vote --

QUESTION: (Inaudible).

SECRETARY RICE: I think when women vote you're going to see a lot of changes in Saudi Arabia. And so just as we have championed in Afghanistan a country, by the way, which was ruled by the Taliban, where women had not only no rights but were treated incredibly brutally until the United States overthrew that government, or just as we've championed women's rights as the Iraqis move forward on their constitution, we're going to champion women's rights around the world.

And I think when women have the franchise, when women are able to vote, you find that changes come pretty quickly in a society. And as I said in a speech here today, half a democracy isn't a democracy. When women are totally capable of being engaged, things happen.

By the way, in the United States, of course, suffrage was only at the beginning of the 20th century. So we have to recognize that we, too, had a history that was not so good in this regard.

QUESTION: So you're saying it's okay if the Saudis (inaudible).

SECRETARY RICE: No, Jonathan, I'm saying that, of course, things happen more quickly now and we're pressing for them. But let's be a little bit humble about what the United States had to go through to fully extend the democratic enterprise. Yes, women at the beginning of the 20th century, people like my ancestors, it took a quite long time to end slavery. And one of the things that I mentioned here is it's in my lifetime, and I'm really not that old, in my lifetime that the right to vote was ensured for all Americans.

So it is a process and one of the things that we have to constantly judge is if countries are making steps forward, if the trend lines are in the right direction, and we have to be encouraging of those trend lines because we're talking about overcoming decades, in some cases centuries, of behavior that did not allow for political freedom.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, thank you very much for your time.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you, Jonathan.

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